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## Conservancy buys wetlands

### Purchase of 2,346 acres hailed as saving Great Lakes ecosystem

By JO SANDIN  
of the Journal Sentinel staff

*Last Updated: Jan. 4, 2001*

A watery wonderland forming part of the largest undeveloped wetland complex remaining on the Great Lakes has been purchased from a Finnish forest products company by the Wisconsin chapter of the Nature Conservancy.

The 2,346-acre acquisition in northern Wisconsin, the largest in the chapter's 40-year history, was announced Thursday jointly by the non-profit conservation group and Stora Enso North America, the Finland-based corporation selling the land. The purchase price was not disclosed.

The conservancy, which has protected more than 50,000 acres at 153 sites in Wisconsin, has been working since 1993 to protect the 16,000-acre mix of dunes, beaches, wetlands and stream banks known as the Kakagon/Bad River sloughs, designated as a National Natural Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1983.

Actually, the purchase comprises 35 separate parcels ranging from 20 to 300 acres in Ashland County. The acquisition is the group's latest in the Chequamegon Bay watershed, one of the "last great places" the organization

#### Chequamegon Bay watershed

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Chequamegon Bay watershed, one of the last great places the organization has made the focus of major purchases.

## Striking a balance

Fred Souba Jr., vice president of forest resources for Stora Enso, which acquired Wisconsin Rapids-based Consolidated Papers Inc. last year, said the land sale represented the corporation's commitment to the Sustainable Forestry Initiative of the American Forest and Paper Association.

Under that comprehensive system of principles, he said, some lands may be judged to be more valuable for the wildlife habitat they provide and the water quality they ensure than they are for forestry. That was the case with these parcels, he said.

"We're looking for balance among economic, ecological and social values," he said.

Since all parcels purchased by the conservancy are located on the reservation of the Bad River Chippewa, ownership of the land eventually will be transferred to the tribe for long-term stewardship, said Conservancy State Director Mary Jean Huston.

"We know from past experience that the best conservation is done by local people who know and love the land," she said.

## Nature flourishes

Tom Doolittle, wildlife biologist for the Bad River Chippewa, hailed this latest step toward preserving the slough complex.

He described that area, sometimes known as "Wisconsin's everglades," as a vast variety of bogs, sedge meadows, beaches, dunes, wetlands and winding rivers. The area contains one of the state's largest wild rice patches, he said, and Wisconsin's highest nesting density of bald eagles (one nest every two square miles).

Doolittle, who said his band now owns about 75% of the reservation land, called the area a priority because of its biological diversity.

"Because of the fragmented ownership, this land acquisition has been particularly important," Doolittle said. "It preserves places all along the way."

The checkerboard of parcels protects more than four miles of frontage on the Bad and White rivers and several smaller creeks and streams as well as 825 feet of Lake Superior shoreline.

Matt Dallman, Chequamegon Bay watershed project director for the conservancy, called the 35 parcels "key connectors" allowing one type of ecosystem to merge naturally with the next in a way that keeps water flowing clean and plant and animal communities undisturbed. It contains both critically

sensitive areas, he said, and buffer zones protecting those fragile lands.

Since 85% of the upland forest has been enrolled in the managed forest lot program, he said, timber harvesting probably will continue in some places, "but in a sustainable way."

"What we're trying to protect is an intact system, from the dunes, sloughs, bottomlands and bogs to the wooded uplands," he said.

The Great Lakes once were home to a number of such areas, he said, near Gary, Ind., Buffalo, N.Y., Saginaw Bay, Mich., and Duluth, Minn.

Not anymore.

"It's a globally important resource," Dallman said. "There's nothing else like that left in the Great Lakes."

Open water provides spawning areas for fish such as lake sturgeon, he said. The system as a whole offers nest sites to such rare birds as trumpeter swans and piping plovers.

The slough complex is especially important as spawning territory because it provides a rare warm water zone in Lake Superior, one of the world's coldest lakes.

Kim Smith, bird curator at the Milwaukee County Zoo and liaison for a U.S. Fish and Wildlife program to protect the piping plover, called the acquisition wonderful news for this threatened species. What the birds need most is protected habitat, she said.

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